DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 335 248 SO 021 137

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TITLE American Education Is Not That Mediocre.
PUB DATE 87
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the California Association of Community Colleges (60th, Anaheim, CA, November 14-16, 1986).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Comparative Education; Educational Change; Educational History; Educational Policy; *Educational Quality; Elementary Secondary Education; Higher Education; International Education; *Outcomes of Education; Role of Education

ABSTRACT

The U.S. system of education has many areas needing improvement, but the continuous cries of the past decade that U.S. students and their schools are in desperately poor condition are misleading. The many admirable features of the U.S. system threaten to be subsumed by the criticism. The United States believes in providing an opportunity for all persons to learn and develop their potential to the fullest. Many of the foreign countries with whom the United States has been compared so unfavorably possess elitist, selective systems that allow limited numbers of students to progress. It also is argued that this is not the first time in the nation's history when education has been scrutinized. In past times, the U.S. system has demonstrated its capacity to grow and change and be receptive to new ideas. Most of the top universities and centers of higher learning are located in the United States, a fact that is not lost on foreign countries, who send their students to the United States in great numbers. As long as it remains open, innovative, and humane, as long as it nurtures inspiration and promotes originality, U.S. education is not that mediocre. (DB)

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by

Khe Ba Do

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American Education Is Not That Mediocre

by Khe Ba Do

Sometime in the late 1970's a national weekly magazine carried a cover page article with a prominent title "Johnny Cannot Read." It was followed by a series of criticisms which determined the school calamity: Johnny cannot add; Johnny cannot say it in writing; Johnny fails Geography; Johnny fails the humanities; SAT, CAT scores are down; history books fail; Johnny's teachers fail the proficiency tests; American students lag behind foreign students in science and math; 3.1 million people in California are barely able to read; instructional equipment is obsolete or inadequate; ... Earnest L. Boyer, President of the Carnegie Foundation, reported a no less pessimestic picture of physical facilities: 71 percent of schools need roof repairs or replacement, 27 percent need repair or replacement of heating and air-conditioning equipment, 20 percent fail fire and safety standards, ...

The most severe verdict came from the National Commission on Excellence in Education which submitted in April 1983 to former Secretary of Education, Terry Bell, a report with the alarming title "A Nation At Risk."

> Our Nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science and technological innovation is

> being overtaken by competitors throughout the world... The education foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people. .. If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we may well have viewed it as an act of war.

It is indeed a risk to contradict a national commission to maintain that American education is not that mediocre. I am making this proposition from the perspective of a newcomer whose family has been transplanted from another system to the American system and who ultimately has joined the American profession which shares that grade of mediocrity.

The President of Harvard University, Derek Bok, said: "it is easy to blame education for losing the leadership in technology and even social ills." Education is blamed for illiteracy, suicide, crimes, unemployment, budget deficit, trade imbalance, ... The President of the California Teacher Association complained that a former American ambassador to the United Nations even said that the culprit in the Marine Guards sex and espionage scandal at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow is public education.

In most governments, education enjoys a low status, has little political power. The top of the government hierarchy is occupied by foreign affairs, defense, security, economy, technology, trade. Education ranks toward the bottom. In this country, education was not addressed in the Constitution. It used to share with health and welfare the same cabinet post in

the administration. A separate Department of Education did not come into existence until the Carter administration and was soon threatened to be abolished by the Reagan administration, together with the Department of Energy.

The mediocrity of education in "A Nation At Risk" report is based on some "indicators of risks." International comparisons make up the first one. "On 19 academic tests American students were never first or second and, in comparison with other industrialized nations, were last seven times."

The current criticisms focus on educational excellence in its narrow sense, limited to the academic subjects, neglecting the political, philosophical and social foundations of education. In that narrow sense the University of California would be the only excellent public education institution in this state. Just imagine that, to be comparable with the other elite systems which retain only the top academic achievers, only the University of California was established to serve a few selected 152,000 students (the top 12% of high school graduates), then 340,000 students who now attend the California State Universities and 1,300,000 who now enroll in the California Community Colleges would be denied of any public postsecondary education.

One should not expect similarity between a uniform, centralized system in a monolithic, close, stabilized society and a diverse, decentralized system in pluralistic, open, changing society; between educational systems which do not have the same structure, curriculum content and graduation requirements.

We believe in providing an opportunity to all people to develop their potential at the fullest. We go out to talk to and to recruit students. We provide not only instructional services but also student services. We do not only teach, we also provide counseling and academic advising. Our educational objectives aim at three domains: cognitive, affective and psychomotor. We consider not only the intellectual abilities, but also the interest, the attitudes and the manipulative skills. We concern ourselves with retention. We help the students to succeed, search for talent, promote the gifted, at the same time care for the slow, the sick and the disabled. We encourage life-long learning.

On the contrary, a selective system which promotes meritocracy encourages early competition, generates anxiety by eliminating the slower and less academic students to preserve only a very few at the top of the schooling ladder, in disregard of the social, economic, health and physical considerations which may affect the learning.

In the French system, the competitive entrance exams screen the students at the beginning of the elementary, junior high, and high school levels. At least three national exams must be passed before obtaining the high school diploma. One of my friends repeated seven times during four years the eleventh grade national exam to move to the 12th grade which was ended by another national exam. No matter how good the student was during the year, if the national exam was failed the whole year was lost. We said: "to study you rely on your talent, to pass

the exam you rely on your fortune."

The Japanese mothers are preoccupied very early with the admissions of their children to a small number of select elementary, and secondary schools prior to their admission to prestigious universities. They spend a good amount of time and money to enroll their children to the "juku's" which are private cram schools offering after-hour classes to students who want to enter top universities through the dreaded "examination hell."

In order to be admitted to the "grandes écoles," specialized colleges which produce an élite class of national leaders, the best French high school graduates have to undergo from two to three additional years of intensive preparation for an entrance examination which selects only a few.

Schooling in such selective systems looks like a conical hat with a narrow top representing the élite. In the American system it is more like a derby hat with a wider top representing many more college students. The comparison of academic achievements between such two systems should not be done without some correction factors.

It is unfortunate that, the following statements in "A Nation At Risk" report were not publicized: "When international comparisons were last made a decade ago, the top 9 percent of American students compare favorably in achievement with their peers in other countries." It reported earlier: "the proportion of Americans of college age enrolled in higher education is nearly twice that of Japan and far exceeds other nations

such as France, West Germany, and the Soviet Union."

A.H. Halsey, a fellow at Oxford University who coordinated the Berkeley-Oxford extension program said: "The American system of giving everyone education produces more happiness. Everything in the British system conspires to produce failure."

Another alleged indicator of risk is the decline of the College Board Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SAT) scores and College Board Achievement Tests (CAT) scores. We should not forget that the purpose of these two tests is to help the colleges select their students based on mathematic skills and verbal ability. They are not the appropriate instruments to measure the complete performance of students in the comprehensive schools of today whose goals and curriculum are totally different from those of the Boston Latin Grammar School founded in 1635 whose goal was to prepare privileged young men for Harvard. Locally, the California Assessment Program (CAP) test is more realistic.

Earnest L. Boyer suggests a "Student Achievement and Advisement Test" (SAAT). "The academic achievement portion of the test would be linked to the core curriculum, evaluation of what the students have learned. The advisement section would assess personal characteristics and interests... The purpose is not to screen students out of options, but to help them move on with confidence to colleges or to jobs."

November 16-20, 1987 was the National Geography Awareness Week. Taking aim at geography ignorance, students at California State University, Fullerton were asked to locate certain coun-

tries, cities in the world, to identify the leading U.S. trade partner. I confess my ignorance in this instance, because when I read sometime ago the headline "A Coup in Ouagadougou" I did not know where and what it was. The geography instructor told me that it was the capital of Burkina Faso; it did not help much until he pointed them out on a new wall map. There are today about fifty more countries in the world than the time we went to school. I just wonder how many of us are able to match these capital cities, Yaren, Vila, Tarava, Funafute with the emerging republics of Nauru, Vanuatu, Tuvalu and Kiribate.

The National Endowment for the Humanities gave a test which demonstrated that Johnny flunks again. Some of the questions were: who wrote "Death Comes for the Archbishop," "Crime and Punishment," "Leaves of Grass." In my opinion, that test is not free of bias in a pluralistic society.

Due to knowledge explosion, teaching should maintain a reasonable balance between facts and concepts, between memorization and critical thinking. In this information era high technology should be used to store and retrieve the data that help the human brain to make intelligent decisions.

It is not the first time that American education is under scrutiny. If I am not mistaken, it was Robert Frost who said: "I believe in education, but I do not believe in going to school." In 1971, Ivan Illich complained that "schools have failed our individual human needs, supporting fallacious notions of "progress" and development that follow from the belief that ever-increasing production, consumption, and profit are proper yard-

sticks for measuring the quality of human life... Our universities have become recruiters of personnel for the consumer society, certifying citizens for service, while at the same time disposing of those adjudged unfit for the competitive race." He called for a "Deschooling Society." Today, the pressure is on re-schooling America, re-tooling the American School to face a new challenge.

The unique strength of the educational system of this country is its openness, its receptivity to new ideas, its susceptivity to changes. It has no complex in borrowing foreign models. It adapted the grammar school and the college from the British. American scholars did not hesitate to make a transatlantic exodus in the early 1800's to learn about the graduate school from Germany. Today there are many Japan-watchers who make a transpacific migration to draw lessons from the Japanese success. President Reagan and Prime Minister Nakasone signed in 1983 an agreement to study education in each other's country. As a result, a "Japanese Education Today" report was submitted by the American team, and "Educational Reforms in the United States" were recommended by the Japanese group. The community college stands out as a product of the American ingenuity with the difficult mission of providing an equitable service to a pluralistic society, but not at the expense of educational excellence.

The American system has demonstrated its ability to respond to challenges. In 1957 the 184-pound satellite Sputnik caught this country by surprise. Its survival was threatened. "The

National Defense Education Act of 1958 provided funds for the improvement of science, mathematics, and foreign-language teaching." Under the leadership of the National Science Foundation selected educators from across the nation were involved in various committees for the preparation of science curricula and textbooks which are still in use today. They were the Physical Sciences Study Committee, the School Mathematics Study Group, the Chemical Bond and the Chemical Education Material Study, and the Biological Sciences Curriculum Study. In the profession they were more commonly called: PSSC, SMSG, CHEM BOND, CHEM STUDY, BSCS. Some of these educators are now teaching at American River College. In 1959, James B. Conant, a scientist and former president of Harvard published the famous book "The American High School Today" in which he recommended the strenghtening of curriculum in the "hard" subjects - mathematics, science, and foreign languages.

Sputnik was a spectacular challenge which called for an instant response. Today's technological and economic challenge is less visible at the beginning, but carries a lasting pernicious effect. The response is slower, but has already begun. Committees, panels, task forces, forums, round tables have been dealing with the push for academic excellence. Throughout the nation efforts have been made to improve curriculum, teacher preparation, credentialing, retraining, relationship between school, home, community, and industry.

At the national level the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching issued a series of reports encompassing

many levels and aspects of education: "High School: A Report on Secondary Education in America," "College: The Undergraduate Experience in America," "The Academic Life: Small Worlds, Different Worlds." A Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education whose members came from various universities issued in 1984 a "Report on Excellence in Undergraduate Education." Both the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers reacted positively to a set of school reform recommendations proposed in 1986 by the Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy. The National Science Board defined in 1986 the role of the National Science Foundation in "Undergraduate Science, Mathematics and Engineering Education." According to the Chronicle of Higher of March 15, 1987, the Congress may tell the National Science Foundation to spend more on educational programs. The National Academy of Sciences, the National Academy of Engineering and the Institute of Medicine sponsored a round table group which published in July, 1987 a discussion paper entitled "Nurturing Science and Engineering Talent."

At the local level, the Academic Senate of the California Community Colleges, the California State University and the University of California published in July 1986 a "Statement on Preparation in Natural Science Expected of Entering Freshmen" which is being discussed throughout the state by science teachers at different levels. High schools have turned to basics, fundamentals, essentials, to more academic, rigorous subjects.

There are indications that the "tide of mediocrity" is

receding. Test scores have improved. The State Superintendent of Public Instruction reports a steady rise of the California Assessment Program scores since 1980. Nationally, the math score has increased. The College Board reported that in 1987 students from most minority groups improved scores on college-admission tests. (The Chronicle of Higher Education, September 30, 1987). California high school seniors tied the national average score on the 1987 Scholastic Aptitude Test and performed better than any state class in a dozen years. Nearly sixty percent of California high school graduates (compared to forty percent twenty years ago, and fifteen percent in many industrial countries today) go on to a college in the state, putting increased pressure on the state's four-year colleges, forcing them to be more selective (The Sacramento Bee, Monday, Sept. 21, 1987).

After the nation was "stunned" by the stock market plunge on that Black Monday of October 19, 1987, only one month later, President Reagan and congressional leaders were quick to reach an agreement on a plan to reduce the federal deficit.

In contrast, the debate on the risk due to mediocrity of education is already a decade old, still there is no sign of spectacular reforms. Is it because the risk is an overstatement, or because education deals not with material things, but with the less tangible mind and calls for more precautions? Does the West meet the East in these words of wisdom? "A mistake in medicine endangers one patient; a mistake in politics endangers many citizens; but a mistake in education endangers a whole generation."

Are foreign educational systems all that good?

For example, "How Good Is Soviet Science?" This is the title of a NOVA program featuring M.I.T. professor Loren Graham touring the Russian schools and scientific institutions. He reports that the Russians have been trying to catch up with Western science and technology since Stalin's time but they are still struggling with the lack of equipment and access to information. They emphasize too much on the theoretical at the expense of the practical science. Their intricate bureaucracy hinders the communication between research and industry. They are far behind the West in biology and computer science. The main tool of instruction is still chalk and blackboard; rote learning is common. The Newsweek issue of November 16, 1987 reported an exchange program between the prestigious boarding school, Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts and the Novosibirsk Secondary Boarding School of Physics and Mathematics in the Soviet Union, a technical high school for students with superior academic ability. The American students observed that the Russian students "openly wrote letters, read magazines and even dozed off in classes. During quizzes, they would whisper answers to friends without fear of retribution - a process they call sharing; they have less homework. While Phillips Academy students are graded daily, their Russian counterparts have one big exam that they cram for and that's their grade."

The admirers of Japan recommend longer days and longer school years for American students. But not many people are aware that pupils in Sweden spend less time in class than the

Americans. The instructional time in their first grade is only two thirds of the time in the same grade in California (880 minutes versus 1,200 minutes per week). Their ninth graders spend 15% less time in class than the California ninth graders (1,440 versus 1,650 minutes per week). Compulsory education in Sweden does not go beyond the age of sixteen.

Japanese education has its own problems, stemming from its centralized control, standardization, conformity, institutional hierarchy, and the emphasis on university entrance examinations ("Japanese Education Today"). Each year, there are about 200,000 students who fail these examinations, many of them are so disappointed that they take their own lives. Thomas Rohlen in "Japan's High Schools" found a more prominent factor that causes adolescent suicides in the "maladjustment to school...lack of motivation, dislike of school, and trouble with homework." The average achievement of the Japanese students in the International Survey of Mathematics Achievement has fallen. Other indicators of Japanese educational decline are "the increasing number of low achievers in primary and secondary schools; increased school violence, especially at junior high schools; and the emerging phenomenon of voluntary dropouts from senior high schools." The growth of "ijme" (school bullying), the intimidation and tormenting of individual students by others, is a group behavior that worries the Japanese officials. Women constitute less than one-forth of the university enrollment. Once admitted to the university after the stiff entrance exam students waste their time in non-academic activities (skiing, playing tennis).

Their professional career depends on the name of the university, not on their performance at the institution. The National Council on Education Reform established by Prime Minister Nakasone gave its second report the title "An Educational Waste-land" and speaks of a "state of desolation" in Japanese education, a blame that the authors of "Japanese Education Today" consider as equivalent of the "rising tide of mediocrity" metaphor used against American education. Education reformers in Japan are seeking decentralization, greater diversification, less uniform-ity and standardization, more flexibility, individualization, international education. In America, this is "déjà vu!"

In its effort toward internationalism in education Japan tries to import American universities. Temple University has a branch in Tokyo. Stanford hopes to open one in Kyoto within two years. Darmouth College will run the first American-style M.B.A. program in a Japanese university. "Twenty seven smaller cities have been trying to lure other U.S. universities with promise of classroom space, scholarships, and chairs endowed by companies." (Fortune, March 30, 1987).

Meanwhile the Japanese want to export to the United States their "juku's". A Japanese company plans to take over a small American university to offer after-hour classes to students who want to enter top universities.

Henry Rosovsky, former Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Harvard, said that "two-thirds to three quarters of the world's best universities are in the United States... In higher education, "Made in America" still is the finest label."

(The New Republic, reprinted in the Sacramento Bee, Thursday, July 2, 1987). One factor of this excellence is the increasing number of foreign students enrolled in American colleges and universities, 349,609 in 198-87, almost half of them are Asians whose campuses of predilection are the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (M.I.T.) and the University of California at Berkeley (U.C.B.) which are nicknamed "Made In Taiwan" and "University of California at Beijing." In 1986-87 UC Berkeley conferred 192 Ph.D. degrees in engineering, about half of them went to foreign students.

Another indicator of excellence is the number of Nobel Prize laureates. The United States is leading the world, espeially in the fields of economics, physiology or medicine, physics and chemistry during the last decade. UC Berkeley boasted that it has about the same number of Nobel Prize winners as the Soviet Union.

Interestingly, the 1987 laureate for physiology, Susumu Tonegawa, a biologist at M.I.T., did not have the American citizenship. The laureate for literature, Joseph Brodsky, was an emigré poet whose native country was slow to announce the award through the major media.

American education has produced that idealistic group of teenagers who managed to meet Mikhail Gorbachev in Washington, on the occasion of the signing of the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty, to present him with a Native American unfinished arrowhead, a symbol of hope; they formed that "Direct Connection" interested in what's going on in the world. American high school

students have designed science experiments to be conducted by the astronauts in space. In Paradise, California the high school has recently opened its door to a fifteen-year-old Amerasian girl who supported herself by selling peanuts in the streets of Vietnam until, by miracle, her father on this side of the Pacific Ocean, recognized her in a picture in Life magazine and brought her to this country after a long and complicated search. Entering that small town, the road signs which read "you are ascending into Paradise" had a special meaning for that lucky girl.

As long as it remains open, innovative and humane, as long as it nurtures inspiration and promotes originality, American education is not that mediocre.

Hopefully, the "rising tide of mediocrity" metaphor was used only with the intent to help stimulate educational reforms in the United States. I believe that these reforms will gain momentum because education is a major issue during the current presidential election campaign, and more than one of the candidates emphatically pledged to make the American system "the best in the world."